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ABSTRACT

Public school districts in Mississippi established the Program of Research and Evaluation for Public Schools (PREPS) to provide good research and evaluation data for sound decision making. A cooperative arrangement was developed with the College of Education at Mississippi State University. PREPS staff directed research and evaluation activities to address each member district's needs and held sharing and training conferences. District personnel completed most of a project, leaving the more technical tasks to PREPS staff. Membership contracts provided funds for the consortium. Resource allocation was achieved using a calendar to plan assignments and schedule activities. The responsibilities of members and PREPS were outlined in annual services-rendered contracts. The role of politics was important to a research and evaluation unit because it generated data for major decisions. Excellent dissemination activities have been PREPS Annual Research Sharing Conferences and Annual Reports. New staff were selected to expand the range of existing skills of PREPS personnel. The PREPS model is suggested as a practical method for smaller school districts to obtain good research and evaluation data. (DWH)

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Managing a Voluntary Consortium Evaluation Unit

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Classical research and evaluation units are usually associated with either state government or large local education agencies. However, in a rural state, few municipalities are considered urban. Also, the associated school districts in such a state usually lack the critical mass to support a research and evaluation unit, although there is still an urgent need for the services provided by these agencies. State and regional support are often unavailable in such states.

In Mississippi, there was a recognition on the part of school superintendents that they needed help in obtaining good data to aid in the decision-making process. In an effort to provide the necessary research and evaluation services, ten public school districts established a consortium: the Program of Research and Evaluation for Public Schools (PREPS). The underlying principles of diffusion and administrative theories were not entirely forgotten at the outset. The consortium, which has grown over the past five years to include 31 districts, now represents 145,000 public school students in the state.

The ten original member districts developed a cooperative arrangement with the College of Education at Mississippi State University whereby the University serves as the headquarters for the PREPS staff and acts as the administering agent for the program. The University's contribution to the program includes free office space, a reduced charge for computer time, management of finances and contracts, and a portion of the professional and clerical salaries.

The PREPS staff seeks to help each member district by directing research and evaluation activities designed to address that district's

particular need. In the past, these studies have included evaluations of programs, research on special topics, public opinion surveys, instructional management, and test development. The consortium also holds sharing and training conferences and, on special occasions, conducts a research project which is of general interest to all members. In an attempt to limit costs, district personnel carry out as much of a project as is possible, leaving only the more technical tasks to the PREPS staff. Therefore, PREPS is constantly seeking to upgrade the skills of district personnel in the areas of research and evaluation.

The remainder of this document will address the five areas of interest to be addressed by the symposium on "Managing an Educational Evaluation Unit." The specific topics are: (a) finance, (b) allocation of resources, (c) politics, (d) dissemination, and (e) personnel.

Finance

The greatest problem faced by most evaluation units is finance. While many units may draw their support directly from either a state allocation or as a portion of a larger tax-supported budget, PREPS, as a consortium, does not have either option available. Therefore, PREPS acquires its funding through a series of "services rendered" contracts with the member districts. These contracts constitute membership in the organization and outline a minimum set of services. Each district pays from $1,500 to $2,500 per year depending on the size of the district.

Each district can then purchase additional services above those minimal services described in the contract according to a fee schedule. The basic membership contract and the fee schedule are developed by the PREPS Advisory Council which establishes all policies concerning the program. The funds are placed in a restricted account at Mississippi

State University to insure fiscal accountability. A budget estimate is prepared each year based on the projected activities and is submitted to the Advisory Council. Unfortunately, all the activities which must be accomplished are not always apparent when the budget is prepared.

One major mistake PREPS made, and has not totally corrected, concerned the pricing of services. Initially, services were tremendously underpriced because of inexperience in setting prices for research and evaluation services. Also, the school districts had never purchased research and evaluation services. This underpricing placed extreme pressure on the PREPS central staff to deliver all the services necessary for the consortium to succeed.

PREPS has realized after five years that rural school districts may not be able to adequately fund an effective research and evaluation unit, especially in light of recent budget cuts. Therefore, PREPS is seeking to form a cooperative arrangement with private business and industry to raise funds to support the program. The current activities look positive since the private sector has a strong interest in seeing an improvement in the public schools, and PREPS is dedicated to the accomplishment of that goal through the use of research and evaluation technology.

Allocation of Resources

Once funds are available, there must be a plan to allocate resources. An organization such as PREPS makes this task extremely difficult since all service requirements are not known ahead of time. In an attempt to better allocate resources the PREPS staff uses a calendar to plan assignments and schedule activities. Each member of the PREPS staff has his/her

primary areas of emphasis and these areas are considered in determining work efforts and assigning tasks. Resource allocation is also assisted by the fact that each member school district signs a services-rendered contract each year which clearly outlines the responsibilities of all the concerned parties. Even with these efforts, PREPS staff members usually find themselves with more to do than they can accomplish.

Politics

Since PREPS is a consortium of public schools, the role of politics is most important. There is no doubt that the superintendents of the member school districts which form the PREPS Advisory Council see a political role for the consortium. Therefore, it is necessary to determine in which areas the group wants to make an impact. For those areas, the consortium staff has to design research which can have an ultimate impact on the area of interest. This insures that research topics are selected with care.

Another aspect of politics in PREPS concerns how decisions are made, especially since Mississippi State University is associated with the consortium. The Advisory Council establishes all the policies of the program: services offered, fee schedule, workshops scheduled, etc. The University administers the program and relieves the pressure of the day-to-day operation of the program. While the Advisory Council sets policy, it is the responsibility of the director to keep the consortium preparing for the future.

Finally, PREPS must be aware of the politics at work when visits are made to the member school districts. Each PREPS staff member seeks to function as an assistant superintendent for research. In this role, the PREPS staff does provide leadership while fitting into the total program of

the school district. By seeking to fill this role, PREPS is able to be effective while supporting the local school district politics. A research and evaluation unit must be political since the unit generates the data by which many decisions are made.

Dissemination

Once research and evaluation studies are completed, there is a need to disseminate the results to those who will use the data. PREPS leaves the dissemination of the results within a district to the respective school personnel. However, each local report always has an executive summary which reduces the findings of the report to manageable size. Each year, PREPS summarizes the results of all the studies from the previous year and publishes the results in the PREPS Annual Report. This report has often been beneficial in encouraging other school districts to investigate similar research projects, a form of replication.

In addition to the written report, PREPS holds an Annual Research Sharing Conference at which each member district presents one research and evaluation report to personnel from the other member schools. The sharing conference has been the highlight of the organization and has proven to be an excellent dissemination activity.

Personnel

The final topic to be addressed by this symposium is the selection of personnel. Personnel considerations for an organization such as PREPS are unique. A person on the consortium staff needs to have broad-based training in research and evaluation techniques. In addition, this person must have a good understanding of how a public school actually functions. He/she also needs excellent communication skills since so much time is involved in working with individuals in a group setting.

While talent is necessary, this person must also be able to work in a supportive role with people who are not as well versed in research and evaluation technology. While the public school leaders may lack a large research vocabulary, they do know what issues are important in their schools. The effective person can translate vital school concerns into useful research and evaluation studies. Unfortunately, there are very few individuals who possess all of these characteristics.

In addition to the general abilities, one needs to staff a program in a manner which strengthens the total skills of the staff. Each new full-time staff person with PREPS has been selected in order to expand the range of skills of the staff.

One should not assume that PREPS has reached perfection in all five areas discussed above. However, despite problems, PREPS has demonstrated over the past five years that a consortium of public schools for research and evaluation can be effective. The management of the evaluation unit is critical, especially in a consortium arrangement. Given the reduction in funds for education, the PREPS model may be one of the few ways that moderate to small school districts can obtain good research and evaluation data that are so vital to sound decision making.